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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 000564

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SUBJECT: ARMENIA ELECTIONS: KOCHARIAN CONVOKES OSCE CHIEFS
OF MISSION

REF: TALLINN 280

YEREVAN 00000564 001.2 OF 002

Classified By: CDA A.F.Godfrey for reason 1.4 (b, d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: On May 3, President Kocharian convoked all Chiefs of Mission of OSCE Member States resident in Yerevan regarding the upcoming parliamentary elections. He sought to convey to the dip corps that his administration was doing all it could to ensure an election process which should meet with the approval of observer groups, and he pushed hard for an objective assessment. He expressed pride about the conduct of the pre-election period so far, and praised the productive relationship his staff had established with observer groups.

He was pleased that opposition groups had thus far refrained from extremist rhetoric or calls for illegal actions. He warned that law enforcement bodies were well-prepared and well-equipped to handle any sort of anti-state protest. CDA used the opportunity to acknowledge the high level of candidate access to voters, both through the media and public assembly, and urged that this trend continue. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) Kocharian opened the meeting by expressing his general satisfaction with the conduct of the pre-election campaign thus far. He warned that in the coming days, the ability of his administration to influence the conduct of the poll would wane; responsibility was now transferring from the central government to the local level, to the many local-level election commissions. He was proud of the way all candidates had been able to engage with the voters, and in particular, for the way the media had presented a balanced view. Singling out CDA for needling, he declared that this was the best demonstration of political will he could be expected to make. (NOTE: In a press event the previous day, CDA said that with technical pre-conditions largely in place, good elections were now a matter of strong political will. END NOTE.)

¶3. (C) Kocharian said he was pleased with the way candidates had approached the campaign. Even opposition politicians had avoided the extremist rhetoric so prevalent in 2003. At that time, Kocharian continued, some politicians were under the "color revolution euphoria" and thought that calls for unlawful action against the state would produce results in Armenia as well. Now, however, politicians understand that these tactics do not work, he said. Nevertheless, he warned that law enforcement institutions were well-equipped and well-prepared for any eventuality and would take action to defend the state. Referring to police action in Tallinn on April 26 in response to protests (reftel), he noted wryly that "our Estonian colleagues showed us how it should be done. There were no complaints about that, so we will follow their example."

¶4. (C) Kocharian said that significant work had been done to improve the voter registry for this election, and while an entirely error-free list was impossible for any country, Armenia would have on May 12 the best list it could produce in this timeframe, thanks in part to support from international partners.

¶5. (C) Kocharian took pains to praise the work so far of the observer groups. He expressed satisfaction with the readiness of ODIHR Director Strohal and Election Observer Mission head Amb. Frlec to engage with him and his staff. He laid out three specific requests -- to which he referred later in the meeting as demands -- for all observers, and asked COMs to pass these on to their compatriots:

- Observers should report only that which they observe, and not events which they have heard about from other parties.
- Observers should, in accordance with Armenian law, register their presence at polling places which they visit. They should also record, in the polling place log, any violations they observe.
- Observers should not become part of the political process.

¶6. (C) Kocharian alleged that following the 2003 elections, OSCE reports cited violations at polling places which had never been visited by international observers. He also complained bitterly that ODIHR rules prevented GOAM officials from participating in the process of drafting reports or from gaining access to primary source materials from observer groups. "It is my job to defend the honor and dignity of Armenia," Kocharian said, and he could not do that if kept out of the process. CDA said that in his outbrief to OSCE COM's, ODIHR Director Strohal had said that it was against ODIHR practice to register at polling places and that to register suspected violations in the polling place log was to make OSCE observers a part of the Armenian Criminal Justice process. Kocharian said that Strohal had agreed that

YEREVAN 00000564 002.2 OF 002

observers could register their presence and said that under no circumstances would any observer be called to be part of a court proceeding. (NOTE: In a May 4 meeting with the Deputy Head of the ODIHR EOM, we learned that observers will, in fact, be instructed to register at polling places, but will be strictly instructed not/not to write anything other than their names and their time of arrival into the log. END NOTE.)

¶7. (C) German Ambassador Heike Peitsch reported that she and members of her staff had heard consistent rumors about vote-buying. Kocharian acknowledged that such rumors existed, and that it was not beyond the realm of possibility that this practice would take place in single-mandate districts. The prevalent rumors about vote-buying for the party-list contest were silly. If a candidate were to pay the rumored price of AMD 20,000 per vote, it would take more than USD 5 million to buy 100,000 votes; this many votes -- if indeed voters stayed bought -- would not even assure a majority in parliament. He acknowledged that some candidates are taking a more obvious path, paving roads, doing repairs to public buildings and the like.

¶8. (C) Kocharian closed the meeting by warning COMs not to encourage radical politicians to take illegal actions. "We have the resources to deal with such actions," Kocharian added.

GODFREY